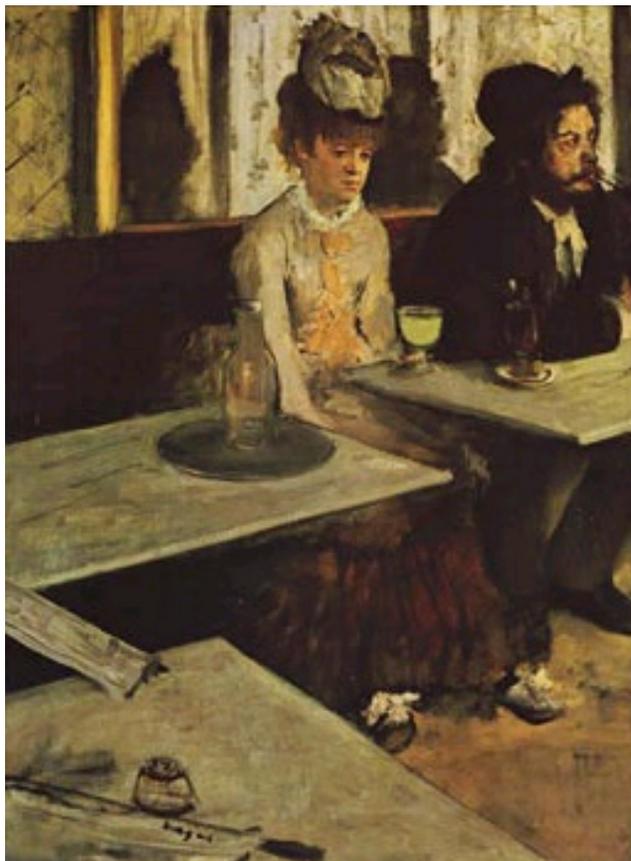


Introduction

We found ourselves shivering as we hurried along. I pulled my hat over my ears and quickly buttoned my coat against the wild, dark, November night. As Rob and I made our way to the pub at the end of Ardeevin Road, stinging nettles of sleet bit into our faces, and a fierce wind howled from the valley below, threatening to sweep us from the path.

“Well, hello!” Jerry called as we entered the warm circle of the pub and stamped the snow off our boots. “I was about to come looking for you. Sit down, sit down; rest yourselves a while.”

Several people shifted down the bench so that we might have a seat near the stove. “Thanks,” I sighed as I pulled off my wooly



L'Absinthe. Artist: Edgar Degas
For more information about this poster click [here](#).

mittens. Holding my hands over the old potbelly, I turned to Jerry and said, “What I need is a cup of hot coffee, maybe with a bit of whiskey thrown in for good measure. It’s freezing out there! I didn’t think it snowed this early in Pennsylvania.”

“What you really need,” said Jerry, “is this.” He nodded to the bartender, who winked back and pulled a bottle from behind the dark oak bar. The label was foreign, the contents within a grassy green.

“What is it?” Rob asked, reaching for the bottle to take a closer look.

“Absinthe,” Jerry laughed.

“You’re joking,” I said. “It can’t possibly be—how did you—”

“Would you believe I got it on eBay?” Leaning forward he whispered, “Would you like to try it, Joanne?”

“Of course. Do you really have to ask?” I babbled excitedly.

From behind the bar the bartender pulled out three absinthe glasses. Rob handed the bottle back to him, and as we watched in anticipation he poured out three equal measures in the bottom of each glass. Then he laid a flat slotted spoon across each one and placed a sugar cube on top of it.

“Where did you get the glasses?” Rob asked. “Never mind, I know; eBay, right?”

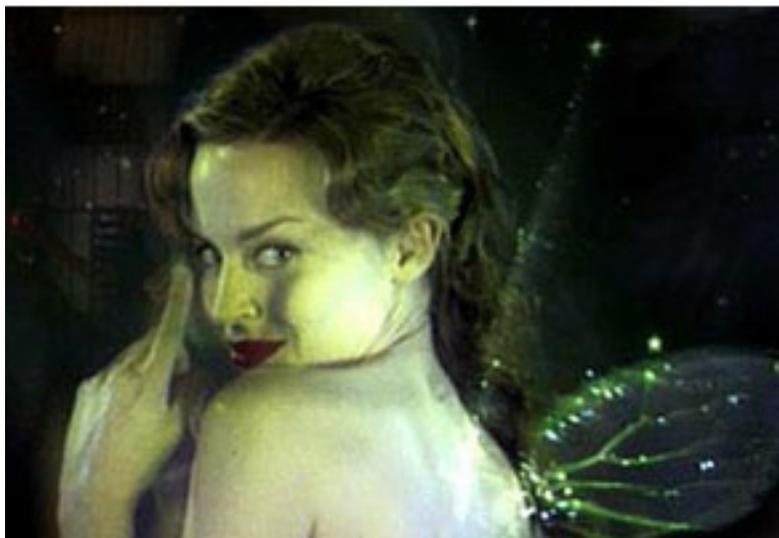
“Yup,” Jerry laughed again.

Jerry, Rob, and I each took a glass. I couldn’t believe I was doing this. As an English major in college I had read Ernest Hemingway’s and Oscar Wilde’s accounts of absinthe drinking.

Art history had taught that Vincent Van Gogh may have cut off his ear due to the madness of drinking absinthe. I was always curious about it, of course — no other drink has been so well loved or so despised — but since it had been banned in the United States for nearly a century, I never really thought I'd have a chance to taste it myself. Yet here I was, in a small Pennsylvania town, about to try it for the first time. Could it possibly live up to its wild reputation? Ah, but before I answer that perhaps we should first take a look at the history of absinthe.

A Brief (Sometimes Disputed) Account on the Origins of Absinthe

There is some disagreement on the exact details and timeline of the birth of absinthe, but most absinthe historians will tell you that the modern version of this lovely green liqueur can trace its roots to the alpine country of Switzerland. In 1792, shortly after the French Revolution, Dr. Pierre Ordinaire, who was living in the Canton of Neuchâtel, prescribed an herbal concoction for his patients made from anise, dittany, sweet flag, mint, fennel seed, hyssop, wormwood, and a variety of locally obtainable herbs, most likely coriander, veronica, chamomile, and spinach. This high-proof alcoholic “medicine” earned the nick-



How can you resist the siren call of the Green Fairy? From the movie *Moulin Rouge* ©2001 Twentieth Century Fox. To purchase a copy of this DVD click [here](#).



One for the road from the movie *Eurotrip* ©2004 Universal/Dreamworks. To purchase a copy of this DVD click [here](#).

name *la fée verte* (the Green Fairy) because of its gorgeous green color and the almost magical effect it had on those who drank it. It is a name that has remained to this day. Many considered absinthe a cure-all and a panacea for whatever ailed you.

Upon his death, Ordinaire supposedly left his recipe to two sisters from Couvet named Henriod, who later sold it to another Frenchman, Major Dubied, who was interested in its use as both a patent medicine and an aperitif. It should be noted that absinthe-like drinks were being produced in the Neuchâtel region long before Ordinaire lived there, and the Henriod sisters were already making their own *bon extrait d'absinthe* before Ordinaire peddled his version.

A few years after Major Dubied purchased the absinthe recipe, Henri-Louis Pernod, his son-in-law, acquired the recipe and began making absinthe in commercial quantities under the name Pernod Fils. By 1805, he transferred operations to France, where he built a large distillery. At the height of its production in the late 1800s, Pernod Fils was producing *more than 125,000 liters of absinthe every single day*.

From the start, Pernod Fils enjoyed modest success, but it wasn't until

around the 1840s that absinthe earned widespread appeal. The French army issued it to soldiers fighting in Algiers who claimed that it gave them strength and warded off malaria and other diseases. When these soldiers returned home, they brought their craving for absinthe with them and demanded it in their local cafes and drinking establishments. Simultaneous to this, a devastating *phylloxera* blight of the French vineyards caused wine prices to skyrocket, making absinthe more appealing from a cost perspective.

It did not take the French art scene long to adopt the drink as their tipple of choice. Writers, painters, and poets claimed that absinthe heightened their awareness and inspired them to ever greater artistic achievements. This dazzling green elixir, with its humble beginnings in the Swiss countryside, had gained a following as no other drink ever had before. For many, the day would begin with a cocktail and end with a few more after work and on into the evening.

Absinthe had made its way to America as early as the 1830s and was sold, primarily in New Orleans, under a number of brand names including Legendre, Green Opal, and Milky Way. There is, in the French quarter, an unassuming brick-and-plaster building known as the Absinthe House which still stands at the corner of *Rue Bienville* and *Rue Bourbon*. Many famous people, from playwrights to politicians, bellied up to its cypress wood bar to enjoy an absinthe cocktail. Marble faucets with brass fountains lined the bar where water could be added, a drop at a time, onto the sugar cubes balanced over the absinthe glasses. William Thackeray, Walt Whitman, President William Howard Taft, and Alexis, the Grand Duke of Russia, are but a few of the personalities that drank here. Aleister Crowley wrote *The Green Goddess* while waiting for a female friend at the Absinthe House.

So what is it about absinthe that makes it so special? There were a number of other herbal liqueurs being produced at the time, what set this one apart?

Absinthe Chemistry

Absinthe is a high-proof alcohol, which is a known depressant. Unlike most other liqueurs of this magnitude, however, it is also infused with a number of herbal stimulants which act upon each other and may produce an intoxicating effect. The most notable of these is wormwood.

Wormwood (*artemisa absinthium*), along with anise, gives absinthe its slightly bitter, licorice taste. Wormwood also contains thujone, reputed to be a mildly psychoactive chemical. Wormwood has a long tradition as a folk medicine stretching all the way back to the ancient world. In Egypt it was used to combat internal parasites. In Greece it was prescribed for menstrual cramps, rheumatism, anemia, and a host of other ailments. During the 17th century, London distilleries were steeping dried wormwood in wine to create “wormwood ale.” Samuel Pepys even describes it in his famous diary, “[we] went to a little house behind the Lord’s house to drink some wormwood ale, which doubtless was a bawdy house, the mistress of the house having the look and dress.”

You may be surprised to learn you already ingest a variety of substances that contain thujone—including the common culinary herbs sage, tansy, and tarragon! It is also an active ingredient in many pharmaceuticals and salves, including Vick’s Vap-O-Rub and Absorbine Junior. Of course, you also consume thujone every time you drink a martini made with vermouth! If thujone really were as dangerous as its early opponents would have you believe, it would not be allowed in the food supply to the extent that it is.

The effect of absinthe on the individual is subjective, but recent research suggests that

thujone acts upon the GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid) system in the brain, which is partially responsible for cognitive thought. However, thujone appears in such small amounts in absinthe that its effects are probably negligible. For those who claim to feel an effect from drinking absinthe, it is most often described as having the ability to heighten one's awareness or that it provides the imbibers with a level of clarity not achieved by drinking other liquors while at the same time unlocking inhibitions and creative thought. Is it any surprise that the Green Fairy was the darling of artists and poets?

The list of artists who used absinthe as their creative muse is like a who's who of the late 19th- and early 20th-century art scene. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Vincent Van Gogh were both heavy users. It appeared in works by Pablo Picasso, such as *The Absinthe Drinker*, and Edgar Degas, in his masterpiece *L'Absinthe*. Writers such as Mary Shelley, who wrote *Frankenstein* while on an absinthe bender, Edgar Allan Poe, the ever-controversial Oscar Wilde, and, of course, Ernest Hemingway all used absinthe to fuel the fire of inspiration. To many, absinthe, the Green Fairy, was the very embodiment of the artistic muse.

The Absinthe Ritual

Part of the sheer fun of drinking absinthe is the ritual that goes along with it. Because absinthe is a high-proof alcohol, it is best enjoyed diluted and sweetened.

To entertain the Green Fairy in the traditional manner, you start with a heavy parfait-style absinthe glass—these are readily available for



The Old Absinthe House, New Orleans. For more information about this poster click [here](#).

sale on the Internet. Pour several ounces of absinthe in the bottom of your glass and set a perforated flat absinthe spoon across the top. Upon this, set a sugar cube. Icy-cold water should be dripped slowly from a carafe or absinthe fountain over the sugar cube, which dissolves and falls through the spoon. The water-absinthe mixture is according to taste, but a beginner should start at five parts of water to one part absinthe.

As the water mixes with the liqueur, a strange bit of chemistry takes place. A pale yellowish-green cloud forms, called *la louche* (pronounced “loosh”), because the oils from the herbs are not soluble in water. Use the spoon to stir the absinthe briefly and sip slowly. Voilà!

So popular was the absinthe ritual that a social phenomenon was born. It was known as *l'heure verte*, the Green Hour, and soon everyone was doing it. But as its popularity grew, so did the public hysteria over its possible mind-altering effects.

The Fall of the Green Fairy

The popularity of absinthe would eventually become its downfall. Originally, the high cost of absinthe meant that only a few could

afford to drink it. It did not take long, however, for others to jump on the bandwagon and distilleries cropped up all over France like mushrooms. These companies, more interested in high profits than a quality product, used a grain or potato alcohol base instead of the distilled wine base used in the recipe at Pernod Fils. Demand rose as absinthe fell into the reach of the middle class.

Absinthe was also one of the first drinks to be openly enjoyed by women. A woman could sit freely in a coffee house where it was commonly served without risking her reputation. Indeed, much of the absinthe advertising was directed at women and proclaimed that absinthe was good for your health. By the 1870s, there were some 30,000+ Paris establishments serving absinthe. Everyone was hooked, and the era came to be known as “the great collective binge.”

All good things must come to an end, as they say, and to serve even the smallest of budgets, bootleg absinthe hit the streets. It was near akin to poison, often made with toxic solvents. Bootleggers used copper sulfate or cupric acetate to create an authentic green color and antimony trichloride to simulate the louche when water was added. It is even speculated that these varieties may have had a high concentration of deadly methanol. It was probably due to these foul creations that tales of absinthe’s madness-inducing properties began to circulate. Temperance movements formed to put an “end to the insanity” once and for all.

Prohibitionists — who already hated alcohol and the free-wheeling life style it suggested — sought to protect us from ourselves by directly attacking absinthe and the decadent, immoral people who drank it. They believed that the disinhibiting powers of absinthe could only lead to the very decay of society. Various temperance societies sponsored tests to see what would happen if you injected a dog or a guinea pig or a rabbit with a high level of

thujone. Not surprisingly, these animals suffered massive convulsions and died. But it was not a fair test. For an absinthe drinker to consume that much thujone from the Green Fairy he would end up dying of alcohol poisoning first.

Still, the prohibitionists were able to spread the propaganda that absinthe was not only the devil’s brew, but dangerous to your health.

At the same time, the French wine industry was on its way to a successful comeback. New World cuttings strengthened their own vineyards, and with an end to the blight vintners sought ways to recover the millions of customers lost to absinthe in previous decades. They actively tried to woo drinkers from the Green Fairy’s embrace and both directly and indirectly helped the prohibitionists in their massive anti-absinthe campaigns.

The media of the day were of no help. Aware of a good scandal when they saw it — especially when it was packaged and wrapped up so nicely — any crime even remotely related to an absinthe drinker suddenly made front page news.

In 1905, Jean Lanfray, a Swiss farmer, shot his pregnant wife and their two daughters before attempting to kill himself. He was a well-known absinthe drinker, and the murders made headlines across Europe and North America. Journalists did not need anything so mundane as a court of law to declare Lanfray’s guilt or innocence. He suffered from absinthism — the Green Fairy made him do it! Of course, they ignored the fact that Lanfray had been drinking all day, and while he was only known to have had two glasses of absinthe, he was often seen consuming massive quantities of wine, sometimes as much as five liters a day. On the day in question, he did have two glasses of absinthe, but he also enjoyed a brandied coffee, a crème de menthe, a cognac, and at least a bottle of wine with lunch. None of that mattered; within weeks a petition with

more than 80,000 signatures demanded that absinthe be banned in Switzerland.

The combined pressure of commercial, ideological, and religious lobbies was too much to withstand. Switzerland was the first to ban absinthe in 1910. On July 25th, 1912, the U.S. Department of Agriculture issued Food Inspection 147, which banned absinthe in America. A few years later, as a “war measure,” France followed suit. The party was over.

The Return of the Green Fairy

Understandably, interest in absinthe waned once it was banned around the world. Distillers made wormwood-free varieties—Pernod is one—but absinthe itself languished in near obscurity for decades until a paper was published in the mid-1970s which suggested that there were similarities between absinthe and the high one could get from marijuana. Although later studies indicated that thujone did not have an effect on the cannabinoid receptor in the brain, the public’s curiosity was again piqued.

But it was the end of the Cold War and the lifting of the Iron Curtain that would bring absinthe back to the marketplace. In 1990, the Czech distiller Radomil Hill was among the first to again make absinthe commercially; today, Hill’s Absinthe—for better or worse—is one of the lead brands on the market and is exported to a number of countries around the world. The Czech way of drinking absinthe—which Hill claims is an authentic Bohemian ritual although there is no historical evidence to support this statement or evidence of a single absinthe distillery in the Czech Republic prior to 1990—is to first pour a shot in the bottom of a tumbler. Next, one must dip a teaspoonful of sugar into the absinthe to absorb a bit of the liquid. Then you set it alight and let it burn until the sugar begins to caramelize. As the flames die down, carefully stir the spoon into the glass, but don’t let it set your shot on fire. You can drink it hot or top it with an equal portion of water and ice. Since

Hill’s Absinthe, like many Czech absinthes, has a low anise content it does not louche, and this ritual replaces the drama of the French method.

Czech absinthe is often compared to mouthwash, window cleaner, Nyquil, and other cold medicines. But, to give credit where credit is due, the “resurrection” of absinthe distillation in the Czech Republic is what led the way for its reintroduction in other countries across Europe. Several old French and Swiss distilleries have again begun making absinthe utilizing old 19th-century recipes.

In recent years, absinthe has experienced an astounding resurgence, and has been embraced by artists, goths, and other counterculture movements. It is annually featured at the Burning Man festival, which has an absinthe bar; home moonshiners are making it in their kitchens; and backpackers are smuggling it home in their luggage. So what is the appeal? Why is absinthe making such a strong comeback across a wide spectrum of society? There are certainly more potent substances out there—you can get more bang for your buck by shopping elsewhere.

Absinthe’s appeal comes from its long history, the legacy handed down to us by the artists and poets of the 19th century. Drinking absinthe in the traditional manner is a sensual act. As Oscar Wilde famously put it, “what difference is there between absinthe and a sunset?” The color, taste, and even the ritual of preparing it evoke a sense of the erotic. Plus, absinthe’s long reputation—deserved or not—of causing madness, death, and the decay of our moral fabric make it very appealing to some.

Although rapidly gaining in popularity, laws regarding absinthe possession vary from country to country. It was never actually banned in Spain, Great Britain, Japan, or the Czech Republic. Over the last several years, countries such as Switzerland and Germany

have lifted their bans on absinthe production. Nowadays, most countries within the European Union allow the sale of absinthe—although they limit the amount of thujone to 10 milligrams per kilogram—while celebrities such as Johnny Depp, Marilyn Manson, and even Eminem have played a key role in spreading absinthe’s popularity. You can walk into a grocery store in France or a liquor store in Sweden and you’ll find it sitting on the shelf.

And what about the United States? Thujone is still banned, but as a food rather than a drug. You are prohibited from commercially producing absinthe or from distilling your own. Absinthe is not a scheduled or controlled substance, so there are no specific laws prohibiting you from possessing a bottle of absinthe or consuming the contents. However, it can and will be seized if found in transit.

Importation of absinthe, or rather the prevention of importation, is handled by the U.S. Customs Department. If a bottle of absinthe is discovered in your luggage, it will be confiscated and “destroyed.” If you have it mailed to you and Customs or the U.S. Post Office discovers it, it will be confiscated and either returned to the original sender or destroyed. You will not be arrested or even fined, but you won’t have your absinthe, either. Many Internet companies now guarantee delivery, and if your absinthe is confiscated they will replace it, although some will still charge additional postage.

You can make absinthe yourself as long as you don’t follow through on that last step and build a still in your kitchen. Unfortunately, distillation is necessary for quality absinthe as wormwood contains some extremely bitter compounds that get left behind during the process. However—and we cannot stress this enough—unless your local laws allow you to distill your own liqueur, building a still is illegal. Don’t even bother buying one of those kits on the Internet where you can mix “ab-



Pernod Fils. Artist: Unknown
For more information about this poster click [here](#).

sinthe essence” with vodka. This is not absinthe, and tastes horrible. If you have any plan of drinking absinthe in the U.S., you’ll have to carry it in or have it shipped and risk your bottle being confiscated. Laws are subject to change, and this information may become invalid. You are responsible for educating yourself. For an updated summary of laws regarding the possession of absinthe visit the Wormwood Society’s excellent and informative Web site at www.wormwoodsociety.org.

Lest you think that absinthe is becoming too mainstream, rest assured that a number of alcohol-awareness campaigns have been gearing up to protest the return of absinthe. This time, however, the greatest complaint seems to be the accessibility of a high-proof alcohol on the market. But 20-somethings have been drinking Bacardi 151 and Everclear for decades, and considering the

high-cost of commercial absinthe, they won't be spending their limited funds when there are cheaper binges to be had. Drink absinthe in moderation, and there should be no cause for complaint.

Absinthe Substitutes

If you are unable to buy, acquire, smuggle in, or distill your own absinthe, there are a number of suitable substitutions. The French liqueur Pernod was originally an absinthe, but today is distilled without the wormwood. Sambuca, Herbsaint, and Ricard are often used instead of absinthe, although the taste is not the same. Absente is a relatively new addition to the market. Made with "Southern Wormwood," a variety that contains less thujone, it is sold as "Absinthe Refined."

A New Love Affair Consummated

Sitting in that bar in Pennsylvania, I stared at the strange bit of liquid alchemy in my glass. Here it was, incredibly, unbelievably, and very much welcome—absinthe! The magical brew that had lent her power to Van Gogh, Picasso, and Hemingway; the Green Fairy who inspired so much devotion, and so much animosity, was there before me.

And so I took a sip.

I had been prepared for its kick. A fan of Pernod and anisette, I anticipated the rather strong licorice taste absinthe would have. But there was something more. I sipped, and my first thought was, "Oh my god, *what the heck is that?*" The wormwood was overwhelming, and unlike anything else I've ever tasted. It was not bitter, necessarily, just different. But after a few sips, my stomach warmed, my muscles relaxed, and I began to enjoy it.

Rob, Jerry, and I finished one glass and then poured another and repeated the ritual. I have to admit, the ritual is a big part of it. Dribbling my water over the sugar, watching the absinthe louche into milky greenness, I felt connected to all of the absinthe drinkers of lore.

That second glass went down more smoothly...as did the third. By my fourth glass, I decided I liked, no, *loved* the taste of absinthe. I also knew I was a bit drunk. But there was a difference.

As I sat at the bar and chatted with my friends, I realized that, although drunk, I was able to hold a very coherent conversation and did not feel as though my thoughts were muddled. I did not experience any of the wild hallucinations or fits of madness attributed to it, but I felt pleasantly, solidly buzzed, in control of my thoughts, and not the least bit queasy. And that may be absinthe's appeal. For those who are looking to absinthe for a good high, you'll have to look elsewhere. Absinthe is not a narcotic and will not make you hallucinate or do anything stupid or crazy that you wouldn't normally do while drunk.

In the pages that follow, you'll find an assortment of cocktails to suit a wide variety of tastes and palates. Some are very traditional, such as the Sazerac, believed to be one of the first cocktails in the modern sense. Others are showy, ballsy drinks meant to prove how tough you are. Others are so deliciously subtle and go down way too smoothly that you'll have to promise yourself in advance you can drink only one or two. They come from bars and cultures around the world and represent the many ways in which absinthe is enjoyed today. I'm sure that at least one of them you'll call your new favorite. I'm also sure you'll call at least one or two of these drinks the foul creation of Satan. But to each his own—someone out there loves it, or else it wouldn't be served in a bar.

So with that, I wish you luck on your dance with the Green Fairy. If you have a cocktail you'd like to submit, a correction you'd like to make to our text, a story to share, or if you'd simply like to chat about the pleasures of absinthe, please send me an e-mail at editor@compassrose.com. Enjoy!

—Joanne